

DPPC Team  Oct 15

Peace Process Update

Taliban insurgents launch a major offensive in southern Helmand province amid slow-moving peace talks

Violence and heavy fighting persist in Afghanistan as the peace talks continue at a slow pace in Doha. In their latest escalation of violence the Taliban insurgents attacked the southern Helmand province and closed in on its capital Lashkargah. More than 5,600 Afghan families have been displaced due to the offensive so far, and the assault is ongoing.

Instead of a reduction in violence, a vital element of the February agreement with the U.S. government, the Taliban insurgents have intensified violent attacks. According to the deal, the Taliban insurgents agreed not to attack major population centers and provincial capitals. But as evidenced by recent events, the Taliban insurgents see violence as leverage in the negotiations and as a means to force their way back into power and take control of the provinces from GIRoA. Recently released Taliban prisoners have returned to the battlefield, and the insurgent group has not cut ties with al Qaeda. Scores of ANDSF members have been killed and wounded in the fighting, and nine others died when two Afghan Army helicopters collided while transporting injured soldiers out of Helmand.

The offensive in Helmand compelled U.S. forces to conduct several airstrikes against the Taliban insurgents in defense of Afghan security forces. The airstrikes were carried out for the first time since June; before that, U.S. forces conducted a strike against the Taliban in March, days after the two sides signed a peace agreement. Further, the U.S. officials repeatedly criticized the Taliban for the high levels of violence and called it inconsistent with the U.S.-Taliban agreement. General Scott Miller, US and NATO commander in Afghanistan, said the Taliban should stop violence

in Helmand and around the country since it undermines the ongoing Afghan peace efforts. The U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, also warned that “distressingly high” levels of violence threaten to derail intra-Afghan talks. For their part, the Taliban blamed the U.S. for the violation of the peace deal. They warned that America would be responsible for the consequences of its actions, referring to the U.S. strikes in Helmand province.

Meanwhile, an open conflict played out in the media over President Trump’s troop withdrawal plan, sowing discord between the administration and U.S. military officials. On October 7th POTUS took to Twitter to announce that US troops “should” be home from Afghanistan by Christmas, undercutting his own National Security Advisor, Robert O’Brien, who said in a Las Vegas speech earlier in the day that the number of

troops will drop to 2,500 early next year. In an interview with NPR on October 11th, America's top military officer, General Mark Milley, called O'Brien's comments on troop levels 'speculation,' emphasizing that the President has made no final decisions. Milley stated that any further troop reductions below the current level of 4,500 must consider conditions on the ground, adding that the U.S. is trying to end the war responsibly and deliberately. POTUS' remarks on U.S. troop reductions were welcomed by the Taliban while GIRoA officials were left wondering about the implications of a hasty American departure.

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